



Evaluating the Vision and Challenges of India's National Education Policy 2020: Towards Transformative Educational Reform

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents the most ambitious and comprehensive reform of India's education system in over three decades. Launched in July 2020, NEP aims to overhaul school and higher education through reforms in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher education, vocational training, and research. While the vision of NEP 2020 aligns with global educational trends, such as holistic learning, skill development, and technology integration, its implementation raises critical questions. Concerns remain regarding adequate funding, infrastructural readiness, teacher preparedness, and the capacity of governance mechanisms to translate policy into practice. The policy seeks to transform both school and higher education by addressing structural, curricular, and pedagogical challenges that have long constrained learning outcomes. It concludes that realizing the transformative potential of the policy requires sustained political commitment, institutional capacity building, and equitable resource allocation. This paper examines the key features, strengths, and weaknesses of NEP 2020, evaluates early evidence of implementation, and discusses persistent challenges and policy recommendations to ensure that the objectives are met.

Introduction

Education has long been recognized as the cornerstone of national development, shaping not only economic growth but also social mobility, cultural identity, and democratic participation. In India, where



nearly one-sixth of the world's population resides, education carries even greater significance as a tool for reducing poverty, addressing inequality, and preparing a young workforce for the demands of a rapidly changing global economy. Despite this importance, India's education system has historically struggled with multiple challenges, including unequal access, wide regional and socio-economic disparities, inadequate infrastructure, and low learning outcomes. Repeated surveys, such as the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), have consistently shown deficits in foundational literacy and numeracy, with large proportions of children in primary school unable to perform basic reading or arithmetic tasks. At the higher education level, concerns about quality, employability, and research output have persisted for decades, limiting India's ability to fully leverage its demographic dividend.

The last comprehensive education policy framework in India was the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986, later revised in 1992. While it introduced important reforms, including a stronger focus on access and equity, the subsequent decades witnessed transformations in the global and national context that demanded a fresh approach. Rapid advances in technology, the rise of the knowledge economy, and shifting labor market demands necessitated new skills such as critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, and digital literacy. At the same time, globalization increased competition, placing pressure on national education systems to produce graduates capable of contributing to both domestic and international spheres. In this changing environment, it became increasingly clear that India required a more holistic and future-oriented education framework.

Literature Review

Scholars and commentators have extensively analyzed the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, emphasizing both its ambitious vision and the challenges of its implementation. Aithal and Aithal (2020) argue that NEP 2020 marks a paradigm shift in Indian education policy by prioritizing holistic, multidisciplinary learning and by emphasizing research, innovation, and skill development. They highlight the policy's potential to align India's education system with global knowledge economies, provided adequate resources and governance mechanisms are in place. Menon (2024) provides a more critical perspective by revisiting NEP 2020 four years after its release, suggesting that although the policy articulates transformative goals, it often reiterates earlier aspirations that remain unfulfilled. Menon questions whether the systemic inertia in Indian education can accommodate the proposed reforms without significant structural changes. Complementing these analyses, Kushawah (2021) highlights the policy's explicit focus on research and skill development, situating it within India's aspiration to strengthen its innovation ecosystem.



Anitha (2024) examines the early realization of NEP's vision across multiple levels—school, vocational, and higher education—and documents meaningful advances in experiential learning, digital literacy, and acceptance of competency-based assessment. However, Anitha's data also reveal persistent deficits in resource allocation, especially in rural and remote regions, where infrastructure and access to trained teachers remain insufficient. Singh and Dixit (2024) explore how NEP 2020 affects academic performance, cognitive development, and stakeholder engagement. Their analysis suggests that while students, parents, and teachers often report improved critical thinking and creativity, these gains are uneven. The perception of NEP's reforms among stakeholders is mediated by teacher preparedness, institutional support, and localized socio-economic conditions.

In the teacher education domain, Kumari and Pandey (2025) emphasize that NEP's mandates for enhancing teacher capacity have begun to shift curricula in B.Ed. programmes toward greater emphasis on digital literacy, inclusive pedagogy, and professional development. Yet they also warn that teacher training centres in many states lack sufficient technological infrastructure and that there is significant disparity in the quality of training provided. Premachandran (2025) similarly observes that while some institutions have begun to adopt pedagogical changes consistent with NEP's guidelines, uptake is inconsistent—some B.Ed. institutions are well poised, others have delay or resistance, particularly where funding or faculty expertise is weak.

Looking at higher education institutions (HEIs), Nagamani et al. (2024) and Goel and Panjeta (2024) both identify several challenges: institutional preparedness for multidisciplinary curricula, adaptation of assessment practices, and ensuring digital infrastructure are major bottlenecks. These studies also highlight issues of equity, where HEIs in less-developed states lag behind in implementation. Singh and Kathuria (2024) focus on multilingual classrooms, where policy goals of mother tongue/local language instruction are praised, but challenges cited include lack of quality teacher training in regional languages, lack of standardized teaching materials, and potential tension between local language instruction and demand for English or other widely used languages.

Collectively, this body of literature suggests that NEP 2020 is making early progress in the areas it targets—holistic learning, multilingualism, teacher training, and flexible curricula—but its effectiveness is mediated by local capacity, socio-economic and regional inequality, resources, stakeholder engagement, and the readiness of institutions. The literature points toward a set of recurring themes: enthusiasm for reform, tangible but uneven changes, and persistent systemic constraints.

Methodology



The methodology adopted for this paper is based on a qualitative review of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and recent media reports on the National Education Policy 2020. Relevant literature was identified through academic databases and online repositories, with emphasis on studies that critically evaluate the policy's design, implementation, and impact.

Key Provisions of NEP 2020

One of the most striking reforms in NEP 2020 is the restructuring of the school curriculum and pedagogy into the “5+3+3+4” model, which replaces the traditional “10+2” system. This new structure recognizes the importance of the early childhood years, emphasizing foundational literacy and numeracy in the initial stages. By formally integrating early childhood care and education into the schooling framework, the policy aligns with international research that highlights the cognitive and socio-emotional importance of early years.

By formally integrating preschool education into the schooling framework, the policy acknowledges the importance of the early years in cognitive, emotional, and social development. The foundational stage (ages 3–8) aims to ensure universal acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy, which has been a critical gap in Indian education. Subsequent stages progressively emphasize conceptual understanding, problem-solving, and critical thinking rather than rote memorization, thereby preparing students for the challenges of higher education and future employment.

The policy also emphasizes a shift away from rote memorization toward holistic, experiential, and competency-based learning. This involves curricula that are flexible, multidisciplinary, and skill-oriented. Assessment reforms are a central component of this change, as NEP 2020 advocates for formative and competency-based evaluations rather than high-stakes examinations. This move is expected to reduce student stress and encourage creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Multilingualism is another notable pillar of the policy. NEP 2020 recommends that the medium of instruction be the mother tongue or local language at least until Grade 5, and preferably until Grade 8. This aligns with research that suggests children learn best in their first language. However, the implementation of this recommendation poses challenges in a multilingual society such as India, where both parents and students often prefer English for its perceived global utility.

A second major component is curriculum and pedagogical reform. The policy envisions a shift toward holistic, multidisciplinary, and experiential learning. This includes the integration of arts, sports, and vocational subjects alongside traditional academic disciplines to ensure well-rounded development. The



curriculum is to be reduced in content load to allow more time for discussion, analysis, and creativity. In terms of assessment, NEP 2020 calls for a departure from the high-stakes examination culture that dominates Indian schooling. Instead, it proposes competency-based, formative assessments that provide a more accurate picture of a student's learning progress. The establishment of the National Assessment Centre, "PARAKH," is designed to create a standardized framework for such assessments, ensuring reliability and comparability across states.

At the higher education level, NEP 2020 advocates for the dismantling of rigid disciplinary silos by promoting multidisciplinary institutions. It proposes multiple entry and exit points in undergraduate education, with students receiving appropriate certifications at different stages. The establishment of a National Research Foundation is envisioned to boost research output and innovation. The policy also emphasizes vocational education, skill development, and the integration of technology in teaching and learning, which aligns with the demands of a rapidly changing labor market.

Another important feature is the policy's commitment to strengthening research and innovation. The creation of the National Research Foundation (NRF) is envisioned to foster a robust research culture across universities and colleges, with a focus on interdisciplinary collaboration and high-quality scholarship. By providing competitive funding and supporting capacity-building initiatives, the NRF aims to reduce India's dependence on foreign research ecosystems and enhance its contribution to global knowledge production. This focus on research is also tied to the broader objective of making India a hub for innovation and entrepreneurship, which is seen as critical for sustaining economic growth.

These provisions reflect the holistic and transformative vision of NEP 2020. The policy attempts to address longstanding weaknesses of the Indian education system while positioning it to meet the demands of a knowledge-driven, globalized economy. However, the breadth of the reforms also means that effective implementation will require unprecedented levels of coordination, investment, and institutional commitment.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite its progressive vision, NEP 2020 faces several structural and systemic challenges. One of the most pressing concerns is funding. The policy recommends that public expenditure on education should reach 6 percent of GDP, a target first articulated in the 1968 policy but never fully achieved. Without adequate financial commitment, many of the proposed reforms risk remaining aspirational. Capacity constraints pose another significant challenge. Rural and under-resourced schools continue to face



shortages of trained teachers, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to digital resources. Implementing multilingual education requires not only the development of textbooks in regional languages but also the recruitment of adequately trained teachers, which is an enormous logistical undertaking.

Teacher training and mindset change represent perhaps the most difficult aspect of implementation. Shifting from rote-based methods to competency-based pedagogy requires intensive professional development, regular support, and sustained incentives. There is also the risk of uneven implementation, where well-resourced private and urban schools adapt to reforms quickly while government schools lag behind, thereby exacerbating inequality. Regulatory reforms in higher education, particularly the consolidation of multiple bodies and granting autonomy to institutions, may face bureaucratic resistance and institutional inertia. Additionally, replacing high-stakes examinations with formative assessment will require the development of reliable evaluation tools and teacher capacity to conduct continuous assessment effectively.

Policy Recommendations

For NEP 2020 to achieve its transformative vision, a number of policy measures must be prioritized. First, there is an urgent need to increase public funding for education, particularly in rural and underserved regions. Investment should be directed toward infrastructure development, digital access, and teacher recruitment and training. Second, the implementation should follow a phased and localized approach, allowing for contextual adaptation and iterative learning from pilot projects. Third, teachers must be placed at the center of reforms, with continuous professional development, mentoring, and career incentives to encourage pedagogical innovation. Fourth, targeted interventions are required to ensure that marginalized groups benefit equally from the reforms, especially in bridging the digital divide and addressing gender and socio-economic disparities.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy 2020 is a landmark reform with the potential to reshape Indian education into a more inclusive, flexible, and globally competitive system. Its success, however, will depend on translating policy into practice through effective implementation, adequate financing, and sustained political will. While the policy rightly identifies the systemic weaknesses of Indian education and offers progressive solutions, the challenges of capacity, inequality, and governance must be addressed proactively.



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